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AUTHOR Nellen, Ted
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ABSTRACT

For one instructor of eleventh and twelfth grade English, teaching the short story offers the best opportunity to teach fiction writing to students. It contains all the elements novels contain, but students can read many short stories in the same time they need to read a novel. Students can also write their own short stories. Above all, literature is crucial in problem solving and in critical thinking. After reading peer-reviewed short stories on the Internet, the students were given material no one else had commented on and allowed to use their critical eyes and become judges of good or bad literature. The students read nine short stories from "Verbiage Magazine" and selected four or five as the centerpiece for an essay. The essay was to be followed by the writing of a short story. Their essays and short stories were published on the Internet on their "Webfolios." They became aware of audience because of the listserv and the webfolios. Eventually, the class gets to the classics and the traditional compare and contrast. The classics should be especially enjoyable for the students because they will know how to read them on their own terms and not on someone else's terms, and they will be able to defend their opinions and present a logical argument. The project evolved into a three-step process: first, the class analyzes a classic short story; then they compare and contrast a classic and a contemporary short story; and finally, the students write their own short story. This constructivist move from the traditional reader response paradigm is designed to be truly more satisfying for the students and the teacher. (NKA)

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Ted Nellen

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Teacher Feature...

Wired For Short Fiction: A Paradigm Shift For The 21St Century

by Ted Nellen

I believe teaching the short story offers the best opportunity to teach fiction writing to scholars for an English teacher. It is short. It is fiction. It is compact and tight. It contains all the elements novels contain. It can be discussed in a few classes. Scholars can read many short stories in the same time they may need to read a novel. Scholars can write their own short story. But above all literature is crucial in problem solving and in critical thinking.

Recently I have transformed my eleventh and twelfth grade English classes into Cyber English classes. I came from a very traditionalist kind of teaching background. I began teaching English in 1974 in prep schools in New England in a very traditional way. Every Monday we had Vocabulary; Tuesday was grammar; Wednesday and Thursday was for literature; and Friday was essay day. In 1983 I began teaching in a New York City public high school. In 1984 I got a computer classroom and I have computers on all of my scholars' desks. Since 1992, each computer has been connected to the Internet. I treat this experience like a field trip and each scholar must have their parent or guardian sign a permission slip, which explains exactly what their child will be doing in our English class. In my waning years, I have become more excited about teaching than I was when I first started. Let me explain why.

I will begin with an incident related to teaching short stories and a contributing factor to my leaving prep school teaching. I assigned my English class to read "Bartleby, the Scrivener" by Herman Melville. After the typical class discussion I assigned a typical essay on this story. One scholar handed in a typewritten essay with the words: "I would prefer not to." I, of course, gave him an A+. My headmaster heard about it and summoned me to his office. We had a disagreement about the grade. The scholar understood the story; the headmaster did not.

Nearly twenty years later, I chose to alter the study of the short story in my curriculum. I was not interested in teaching the same old short stories again. I had been reading peer reviewed short stories on the Internet and was enjoying the short stories I was reading. I decided to share them with my scholars. I recognized that many of these short stories did not represent the best literature available and that some may be unacceptable in many English classes. They certainly would have been unwelcome in my class a couple of years ago. However, knowing that my scholars were constantly subjected to the classics year after year, I decided to give them material no one else had commented upon and let them use their own critical eyes and to become their own real judges of good or bad literature. Too often I had heard my scholars from the past remark how "boring" a short story was when so many others had deemed it a classic. The one thing I did not hear from my scholars was the word "boring". They may not have liked a selection and they defended that opinion with an intelligent argument. But they never used the word "boring" and I never had to explain too much about the story for them to understand it.

I selected the current issue of Verbiage Magazine and had my scholars read the nine short stories and then had them select four or five of them as the centerpiece for an essay. This essay was to be followed by them writing their own short story. Their essay and short story were published on the Internet on their webfolios.

I wrote to the editor and site owner, Tom Boutell, asking him for permission to download the current issue of Verbiage Magazine to our schoolsite into a specific directory. I outlined to him my proposed use of the issue. I was given his encouragement and permission. Of the ten stories in the issue I selected I eliminated one story, "The Girl" which seemed unnecessary to our study. I also required that they all read "The Philanthropist" so we had one story in common. My eleventh grade scholars then spent the next two weeks reading the stories and keeping fact sheets on each story. A fact sheet is a device I created to help my scholars take better notes when reading short stories. The fact sheet keeps track of title, author, and in this case, the URL or location of the short story on the Internet. The information I wished the scholars to keep included setting: time and place; characterization for each major character: appearance, thoughts, speech, actions, and reactions by others; plot: man in conflict with man, man in conflict with nature, and man in conflict with self; various literary devices like symbol, foreshadowing, flashback, and a host of others; and theme. Each story had its own fact sheet.

As the scholars were reading and maintaining their fact sheets, I would walk around and view their fact sheets. All of the work was being done independently in the class on the Internet. After the first week, I began talking out loud as the scholars worked. I spoke from my observations of their work. As they began writing their essays on the Internet server in our class, I was able to access their work in progress from home or after school. I continued to make observations, corrections, and suggestions about their works in progress. I had never had such monitoring capabilities before.

Another element I added was to put our class discussion about these short stories on our class listserv. I would post to the listserv questions, observations, and hints about these stories and the scholars would answer to the list when they were ready and prepared to do so after reflecting on the question before answering it. This process gave the scholars total control of their own work and

answer. We were not in a traditional classroom studying the short story in a traditional teacher dominated, directed environment. We were all engaged and on task and working at and on our own level. Because the scholars' work was being done on the server, the scholars could access each other's work. This provided a perfect introduction to peer review. Comments from the scholars could go directly to the scholar author or to the list. The scholars were more engaged now in their own education and their own work than I had ever seen scholars engaged before. The essays they produced were thoughtful and well done, but above all the essays were their own words on stories they were reading without the prejudice of prior criticisms or opinions or regurgitating teacher's pontifications. They became aware of audience because of the listserv and because of the webfolios. They had read short stories that no one else had read or commented on. They enjoyed these short stories. They spoke well of them. They spoke ill of them. They spoke intelligently of them. They published their essays on their webfolios on the Internet.

The next assignment was for each scholar to write his or her own short story. Each and every scholar truly enjoyed this assignment which was a reversal of the opinions they shared when I first announced it two weeks earlier. In fact, many had already begun their own short story. Their own stories were uniquely theirs with their characters, their setting, their plots, and their themes. Allowing them to study the short story and then to apply it in this manner produced work the likes of which I had never seen in my previous years as a teacher.

Eventually we get to the classics and the traditional compare and contrast. What is especially intriguing about this exercise is that the scholars select their own stories based on author recognition, name recognition, or recommendation. An added benefit is that the scholars may begin reading as many as a dozen stories before they select the two upon which they will write their essays. This aspect of introducing scholars to many short stories is not

possible in the traditional class. What has happened is that they have deposited some information about unfinished stories in their mental databases for future reference. In fact as they do peer review of fellow scholar's essays on these short stories, they become inclined to read them as they do the peer review. Getting the scholars to read like this is an anomaly I can accredit only to the wried environment and empowerment offered by this new environment. I couldn't get this reaction in the best prep school let alone a NYC public high school.

I believe I did these scholars a great service by providing this intimate look at the short story. The knowledge they acquired will stay with them for a long time and will provide them the critical eye to be objective when they do finally read some of the classics. They will enjoy the classics because they will know how to read them on their own terms and not on someone else's terms. They will be able to defend their opinions and will have the power to present a logical argument. The short stories they read today may be tomorrow's classics and they had the first word of criticism on them.

This project has evolved into a three step process. First we analyze a classic short story. Next we compare and contrast a classic and a contemporary short story. Finally the scholars write their own short story. This constructivist move from the traditional reader response paradigm is truly more satisfying for the scholars and teacher. Teacher or certain scholars do not dominate the discussion nor the thoughts of the whole class. So much more emerges when each and every scholar reads and presents their own opinion. Cyber short stories is just part of the new paradigm shift in the teaching of English.

About Ted Nellen...

Ted Nellen, Cybrarian, educational consultant, staff developer for Alternative High Schools of NYC, adjunct professor at Fordham University and New School University as well as guide and TA for Classroom Connect University. He began teaching high school English in 1974. He began using computers in his NYC

public high school Cyber English class in 1983, using the Internet since 1985, using the WWW since 1993. He is a Shakespeare scholar, A Carnegie scholar, a doctoral candidate, a conference speaker, a published author, and has been named teacher of the year twice in NYC public schools. Actively engaged on many Foundation educational advisory boards and on National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) technology assemblies, commissions, and committees. As a friend of his tells him, "You have your fingers in everything related to technology and education." A detailed list of publications, presentations, education, and honors can be found at his on line resume: http://www.tnellen.com/ted/ email: ted@tnellen.com